Changeling

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It was with a loud rumble and burst that a wall of the catacombs exploded deep below the City of Lights. That the city wouldn't acquire that particular moniker for a good few years yet was nothing which concerned the beastly, hairy fey-creature now crawling out from between the cracks that had formed in the wall. Beastly, yes, yet tall, and thin, and *deft*. At last, they broke from the wall completely, their body twisting and turning in a way no human form could match — and fell flat onto the ground.

"There… Much better."

Whilst the Fae in general had an awesome gift of instantaneous transposition, their sense of *direction* was unfittingly terrible; while it was true that they could open a door wherever needed — for example, in the heart of France while they tried to escape an overbearing family — that didn't mean that they knew exactly where they would end up.

The Fey spared a moment to take stock of the skulls which their arrival had knocked out of the wall, and extended an apology to the unfortunate remains, quickly replacing them where they belonged. Just as swiftly, they left again, summoning another door. With the greater mental focus now available to them, they made sure to find one which would lead to the surface.

This time, they emerged from between the bark of a tree, befitting fairy stereotypes. It took a few moments to confirm they were alone — so long as one did not count the many headstones nearby as signs of company. They took the opportunity to quickly alter their form, abandoning their beastly looks, though they kept a few of their elfin traits; a controlled risk. Certainly, should anyone notice them, the pointed ears and sharp nails might give away the fact that something was unique about this stranger — but in all probability, the simple black suit would tell any passerby that they were simply looking at a grieving young man, paying respect to some departed mortal. Such people needed their privacy; no one would peer too closely.

However, the Fey's presumptions turned out to not be entirely accurate.

"Excuse me!" a stranger called out across the graveyard. "Are you well?"

The Fey looked around and saw an older man, wearing a priest's garb.

"Oh, no! I wouldn't worry," they assured him. "I'm merely here to visit an old friend, I won't be staying too long."

The priest came over with an understanding smile.

"Of course, what else? Maybe I could help you, young… lady? Sir?"

The Fey resisted the quite strong temptation to laugh at the human's confusion regarding their gender; the level to which this 'gender binary' was ingrained in this culture would be quite funny, if it weren't so sad.

"It's been a long day, Father. I wouldn't worry too much."

"Well, either way, my child," the priest said as they tried to move on — "to whom have you come to, ahem, visit?"

They gave him their best wan smile. "If you would be so kind as to point me to the grave of Oscar Wilde…" Sensing the human's hesitation, perhaps a trace of suspicion, they elaborated: "He was an old friend of mine. An old friend. Could you lead me to him?"

"As you wish," the man said, nodding in that grave, priestly way. "Tell me, my child," he said as they walked — "I hope you won't mind my asking, but what is your name?"

"Dorian," the Fey responded.

They'd always been one for a good book.

* * *

A few years, Dorian assured themself, that was all that they would stay for. A few years in the world of man to learn about them, to understand them better! What makes them good? What makes them different from others? In a world so big, what sights were there to see?

As another book was thrown onto the fire, they struggled to think of a single positive.

Dorian, of course, watched only from a distance, but they could feel the heat against their face from over here. The sight of pages turned from a faded yellow into that charred black before dust… it scared them. The *Institut Für Sexualwissenschaft* had been a location Dorian grew incredibly familiar with, visiting many times and even making human friends there when need be. The *Institut* had helped people, and even taught Dorian of things they never knew about Man, about the fluidity between attraction and physical gender. "Intersex" had become a title Dorian connected greatly to; they had celebrated when they discovered there were humans like them, that they could be understood by these lower-dimensional beings.

And now all that research was being burnt away by men fueled by rage. It hadn't been too long ago since the world had seen what hateful people in power could do, so it was impossible to ignore the warning signs in front of them. Dorian couldn't stay in Germany or anywhere nearby for much longer, knowing there was an increasing amount of prejudice and risk of war. The average Fae, of course, would never get involved, as this wasn't their world.

Dorian couldn't. There had to be a way for things to get better, didn't there?

* * *

BOOM!!

Gunfire flooded Dorian's ears as they ran, side-by-side with Alistair as the ground exploded around them. Alistair was clumsy, fumbling with his rifle and bumping into trees as the sound of war surrounded him. He was young, barely twenty-two, and fighting in a battle far bigger than any of them, a war that would either outlive them, or leave them forgotten in the years to come.

Even then, Alistair refused to stop fighting. He didn't care about 'king and country'; he didn't even much care for his own survival — though he hadn't been remotely suicidal before the war.

He had a family that he loved — he had a life he knew he wanted to live. Alistair had been more than clear about that, one night alone with Dorian where he poured his heart out like a waterfall. Dorian could see the beauty in Alistair's heart, listening to his words like they were poetry weaved word-by-word just for him.

They had shared their first kiss that night. Followed by another, and another; whenever the pair shared time alone, but never when anyone was near, for they dared not be caught.

A promise, a *pact*, was formed — however long it would take, they would both make it out of this. They could move up to Scotland and live on an island, they could've bought a dog and could've had a farm, where they could have a quiet life after all this chaos. Dorian knew they would tell Alistair what they were someday — he deserved to know, and Dorian knew that Alistair would love him all the same. But not yet.

As Dorian lay on the ground, their chest torn open by shrapnel, they couldn't help but feel they were pouring out their heart in the wrong way.

"No, please Dorian, just hold on," Alistair had said in the middle of a panic, having dragged Dorian into cover. He held his lover tightly, careful not to touch the open wound as he panicked. "There has to be something I can do," he pleaded through tears, "What do I do? Dorian, please talk to me."

Breathlessly, Dorian laughed, holding onto Alistair's hand as he panicked. They were doing their best to stay together, although having metal sticking out of one's chest tended to make that difficult.

"You… You need to go, Alistair," Dorian insisted. "You need to run and get somewhere safe."

"What? No! I'm not leaving you! We had — we have *plans*!"

"Then we're… just going to be a little late…"

"Dorian, no! Please," Alistair cried out, holding Dorian tighter.

How could he know how much it hurt? Not just the shrapnel, but the arguing, the feeling that Alistair's life was held in their hands and, with one wrong move, might slip out. They *couldn't* let Alistair die in panic. Dorian breathed slowly, holding onto Alistair's arm like a vice.

"I'm serious. Find somewhere to hide… and then I'll find you," they promised. "I'll find you, Alistair. However long it takes."

The guilt would eat at Alistair for years. But as another explosion blew right next to them, Dorian couldn't hold back anymore.

"Run!" they yelled, their voice almost echoing over the gunfire and finally pushing Alistair over the edge.

"I'm sorry," he yelled through tears, kissing Dorian's forehead and grabbing his rifle tightly.

Dorian let out a sigh of relief as Alistair ran out from their hiding spot, managing to avoid gunfire and heading for cover. He would be safe now, Dorian knew, which meant they could finally deal with this shrapnel. Their hand wrapped around a piece of metal and quickly pulled it out, screaming in pain. They didn't have time to slow down or stop — they needed to get out, heal from this, see Alistair again.

* * *

"And you haven't seen him since?" Harriet yelled over the crowd, just loud enough for Dori to hear.

She liked 'Dori'; she thought it rather fit the Fey trying to keep up with history. Harriet had caught Dori inside the Pride rally, carrying a sign that read 'DANCE WITH THE FAIRIES' in big bold letters, which had a way of keeping her attention. And now here they were as the night ended, still rallying full of energy.

"Not since the Great War!" Dori yelled back to Harriet. "Well, the other war, the Not-So-Great-But-Did-It's-Best War!"

They were proud of that joke, especially with the smile that came across Harri's face.

"Why not?" she asked.

"Were you not listening? The last time he saw me, I looked to be on the verge of death! If I turned up now, all these years later, he'd die of shock! I can't let that happen. That wouldn't be love," Dori insisted, raising their sign higher. "It'd be… cruel."

Harri shook her head, staying close to their side.

"But surely he'll understand!" she argued. "You're one of the Fae, you're tougher than most of us measly mortals —"

"I didn't *tell* him I was Fey."

Harriet exhaled, a sort of hybrid of groan and sigh.

"…*Really*? Why not? You're practically *bragging* about it, these days," she said, grabbing the arm that held the sign and giving it a little shake.

Her features relaxed at Dori's pained expression.

"Look," she said more quietly. "You love this man, don't you?"

"Of course I did —"

"Did, or do?"

"I do! Of course I do," Dori said, annoyed, not wanting to run this conversation in circles.

Harri smiled at that, stepping in front of them. She held onto their hands tightly, cupping their chin to meet eye-to-eye. "At least see him once, darling, or you're going to spend a long time regretting it. A very, very long time."

* * *

Fine, Dori thought to themself as they stood on the doorstep of a nice English cottage. Maybe Harri had a point. Dori had tracked down Alistair ages ago, not long after the war, and so wasted no time in taking a Fae-Door to his house. They arrived in a tree outside the front door, and knocked. *Just say hello*, they thought. *What's the worst that can happen? Tell him you're sorry for being gone so long; that's a human thing, he'll understand.*

Nothing that Dori rehearsed in their head prepared them for the door to open to a young child. She had to be no older than six — her hair in pigtails, and wearing a yellow flowery dress. She looked like she'd stepped out of a postcard.

"Oh," Dori said in surprise.

"Hello."

The young girl stared at them for a moment, almost like she was staring through them. Even through war, this might've been the most uncomfortable Dori had felt since he'd arrived.

"Well, um, I clearly have the wrong address. Sorry, I'll just, um… quite."

Dori barely got their foot off the front step before the girl turned and yelled into the house:

"Dad! There's a man here to see you!"

Dori's spine straightened, and they spun to look at the girl again, one arm outstretched as if to hold her back. If only they could defuse this situation before it got out of control —

"Well, um, now, wait, hang on —" they babbled, reaching of anything to say, anything at all. "Look, in the first place, I'm not exactly a man really, more of a third… thing… and even if I were, I wouldn't exactly —"

The girl didn't seem to care. Even without Doors, children could be so *fast*. She'd already bounded out of sight, and suddenly Dori could hear a voice they hadn't heard in many long years — a little older, now, more assured, but

unmistakable. For a second they wondered about their own age. Would their youthful features reveal their secret for them, before they even spoke?

"It's okay, Caroline," said the muffled voice of the girl's father in the next room, and then, Dori could react, he was coming closer. "I'm sure it's just the postman, or some… delivery…"

The man stopped in front of the doorway, words trailing off.

Who looked more shocked to see the other? Alistair, who was seeing a ghost on his front doorstep, or Dori, who had never considered Alistair might settle down? The young girl, Caroline, ran back inside as the pair just stayed silent in the doorway.

"You're… you can't be," Alistair stuttered out. He was gripping the doorhandle as tightly as he'd held on to his lover's broken body, on that battlefield, long ago.

"I am," Dori said through an uncomfortable pause. "That is — I — it's me. I… I can't begin to imagine what you're —"

The hug shut them up, as tears fell into their shoulders.

"I'm sorry I left, I'm sorry I didn't wait for you, but I thought you died and I —" Alistair blubbered out, failing to form cohesive sentences. Dori had never been good at comforting, but they were capable enough to return a tight hug.

"It's my fault," they mumbled back as they held their lover close — as much for their own benefit as for the human's. "It's me. I should've come back sooner."

"I don't…" Alistair pulled back, wiping snot from his nose as he tried to calm down. "I'm sorry, but you really can't stay."

It was almost painful for Alistair to look at Dori, they imagined. The image of their last moment must be seared into his brain. They couldn't hold it against him. It hurt, all the same.

"It's just… I have a daughter, and my wife —"

"Wife?!" exclaimed Dori, shocked.

Alistair gave a shy laugh. "Yeah, it's… it's been a while."

The words choked Dori as they asked:

"Are you happy, Alistair?"

Alistair stared forward, past and through Dorian, unable to form a response.

Dori merely smiled through the silence. "That's okay. I'm glad," they said, before kissing Alistair's cheek. "I hope I see you again," they said softly into his ear, a tear trickling down their elfin cheek.

In a blink of an eye, Alistair was standing alone on the doorstep.

* * *

"Come on Harri, put your back into it!" Dori yelled over the chaos around them.

Harri huffed back, rubbing her spine with one hand as she growled:

"My back's not in the same state as yours, you know!"

It had been Harri's idea to join the rally in London — it was exciting to her, and Dori couldn't help but agree. It felt so incredibly *human* to fight for good; like something from a fairy tale. (Oh, fairy tales were all too human, in Dori's experience.) So here they were, the two of them, pressed from all sides in the middle of the crowd, holding a banner as high as they could. Banners were human, too, though there was something amusingly old-fashioned about them. It had 'GAY AND HERE TO STAY' written across it in bold letters. Dori had pushed for 'SPEND A NIGHT WITH A FAIRY', but Harri had insisted that it sounded more like an ad than an act of rebellion.

"I can hold both ends if you'd like! Go on, so many like-minded people? You might get lucky," Dori said in a taunting voice as they took the other post from Harri.

Harri rolled her eyes and kissed Dori on the cheek, holding onto their arm.

"You say that like you aren't coming home with me tonight," she told them with a wink, before losing herself into the crowd.

Probably for the best, Dori admitted to themself, since they didn't have a good enough comeback.

The rally moved down the streets of London and Dori couldn't help but love the attention; it was something they'd been craving for so long. Eyes were on them and all the people that had been tormented and hurt across years and years. Homosexuality had only been made legal a couple years back which infuriated Dori to no end. Outlawing love; now that was *annoyingly* human.

Truth be told, they still couldn't decide how to feel about the people around them. People like Harriet had been so open and loving that they were able to reveal everything and anything about themself freely, while they had also been side-by-side with those that wanted nothing more than to see Dori strung up, or nailed on a cross, or whatever mode of slaughter was in fashion these days. In a better world, they'd have formed a stronger view by now.

As Dori saw the approaching officers come into view, they were glad to not have that answer now. They were surrounded by their people, and they'd never felt stronger.

* * *

Delilah sat alone in the bar, a single pint in front of her as the bar remained quiet.

At least, it felt quiet to her. Perhaps it was busy; very probably it was. But she had grown used to drowning out the sound. It didn't matter; it was never from anyone she cared about. All she could do was let her mind wander back to that

day ten years ago, one of the happiest points in her life. All her friends, even Harri, by her side — how many of them had she seen die now?

In the world of the Fae, they said you could *feel* the death of another Fey. Their very presence would leave the world, evaporating like mist on a cold day. She'd never felt it for herself, but now she wondered if, perhaps, humans had been the same, all along. Such different flesh, but perhaps their souls dissolved just like the spirits of the Fey — into that deathly mist. Her world was foggy, these days, Delilah felt; full of drifting ghosts.

No, the human world was more than foggy. There was a target painted on her back, like she was practice for scouts. Something was hunting her, stalking those humans she'd come to hold so dear.

It wasn't anything so crude as a 'gay virus', this illness, no matter what those bigots, those evil, senseless, sanctimonious fools, were peddling to everyone that'd listen. It certainly wasn't the victims' *fault*. And yet there was an insidious specificity to it all, beyond the imaginary whims of microbes; like a thousand frail, hard-won bridges burning. Delilah thought of all the friends she'd made that had abandoned her over this illness. She couldn't help that she now felt more isolated than ever.

Even that first day she came here. That must've been almost a hundred years ago now. The world had been different, then. And so had she — she hadn't even been a 'she' in those days! Though the days of 'they' would come again, she knew. She smiled as she ran her finger along the edge of the pint glass, picturing how she and Wilde had danced together, all night long. How she'd heard his stories, and how they had *hooked* her on this world, well and truly. That was another word they hadn't had then, but it fit.

If it wasn't for that 'wilde' night, she thought, *I'd never've been Dorian. What would you think of the world now, old friend? Would you be able to accept it? Would you show me the beauty in all the misery?*

Delilah rolled her eyes, laughing at herself. Or maybe *with*. How melodramatic! How human. Maybe she could've been a poet — maybe she

could yet be! There was all the time in the world to try; it wasn't like she had any plans, or anyone to care for.

In that overwhelming silence, her attention was grabbed by the shuffle of a chair next to her.

"Two pints of lager, please," the voice said as they got comfortable.

That voice… It was certainly familiar. It took far too long for Delilah to realise who it was as the grey-haired gentleman turned to face her and asked, "So long as you don't mind another drink, sir?"

Delilah chuckled to herself, drinking from her glass.

"It's madam now, actually," she explained to Alistair.

It made her smile how quickly that attempt at confidence and surprise turned back into red-faced shyness. *There you are*, she thought, *that's more like you.*

"Oh, is it! The things one misses," he said with a timid laugh. "I *am* sorry. But in my defence, *madam*, it *has* been a while!"

He laughed again, pleasantly — light, but joyful — as the drinks were placed down in front of them. He pushed one in front of her, getting comfortable.

"I like the beard," she observed. "You look different, it's a good look."

"You haven't changed a bit," Alistair said softly.

"Oh well that's not true!" Delilah said with annoyance. "For one thing, I'm trying a turtleneck for the first time!"

Alistair didn't reply, and simply looked at her again.

"Oh, don't you laugh," she teased. "I think it looks rather cute on me. Or… handsome? I'm still not sure," she admitted as she drank.

But Alistair didn't laugh. He stared, kept staring — he couldn't help it. She winced as she noticed, and felt a pang, hoping he'd attribute the adverse reaction to the beer. *Right*. The age thing. Somehow, it had slipped her mind — perhaps

because their last encounter hadn't been long enough for it to come up — but it must have been, what, fory years since the war? And somehow, here was the same old Dorian… whatever her name was now. Here was someone who looked like she hadn't aged a day, sharing a pint with an old friend who looked fifty years her senior.

She met his eyes, feeling oddly vulnerable, as the silence lingered.

"I used to say you were impossible," he admitted finally. "I didn't expect to be proved right."

Delilah stayed silent. Part of her felt that he wasn't here to just get her a drink.

"I never stopped thinking about that night," Alistair admitted. "The day you showed up on my doorstep… I really thought you were a ghost. I said to myself that it must've been some act of God, a moment to see you again. I thought it was a gift."

Delilah turned to Alistair, wanting to give him her full attention. "I… I should've seen you sooner. I was scared to. It's obvious, I'm not… exactly normal."

"Neither of us are," Alistair said, "and I don't care. You know that."

She did, of course she did. They'd told each other everything; everything about *that*, at any rate. That was why the wife had been such a shock.

"I told my wife I'm gay," Alistair confessed with feigned detachment; "she didn't take it too well. We kept it a secret, obviously, divorced for other reasons. Never really settled down. But then I saw your face again, in a newspaper, a few years ago. Causing trouble at those rallies. I figured 'oh… that's got to mean something', you know? So, I went looking for you, trying to find anywhere that the mysterious Dorian had gone."

"And you found me."

"Yes."

Delilah smiled, holding a hand to Alistair. He still seemed hesitant, as though he felt there was some remote, terrible chance that his hand would pas sstraight through hers.

"I'm here," she said reassuringly. "And here to stay. I promise."

Alistair sighed, daring to reach out. In a single moment, decades of weight lifted off his shoulders as his eyes watered. "Oh, thank god, I really thought I was going crazy…"

"Cazy?" Delilah said with a laugh. "You're not the one who's failed to age a day in 85 years! I'm the one who's out of step with reality, if anyone is."

"Jesus, you're old enough to be my dad," Alistair said back. "Or mum, sorry."

"Oh, stop apologising, I'm still experimenting. Besides, you remember how we used to be. I can be both," she said with a wink. Not just any wink, either. She'd learnt that wink very intimately, thanks to Harri — and its effect on Alistair was crystal clear as he blushed again.

"Should I still call you Dorian?" he asked after a moment; he was clearly doing his best.

"I'm trying Delilah," she said with a smile. "What do you think?"

"It's cute," he replied.

"Well seeing as you're the expert, I'll take your word for that!" Delilah said with another wink, which almost had Alistair howling with embarrassment.

And that was how the two spent the rest of that night. Days were dark, as they would be for a while, but the two experienced something they hadn't felt in many years.

They felt at peace.

* * *

That feeling lasted for another 35 years.

* * *

"Do you remember that?" Delilah asked, cuddled up by Alistair's side as he flipped the pages for the old man.

He felt almost guilty as Alistair huffed with each turning page.

"I'm an old man," he argued, "not a dandelion! I can turn my own pages!"

"I know, but you know how much I like babying you."

"You're almost a hundred years too late for it."

"I know! One more year and you'll get a letter from the Queen," Delilah said jokingly.

They both laughed. Alistair coughed. Then the laughing stopped.

"What about this then? That was Broadway, do you remember?" Delilah had grown to love Broadway, the pair of them having visited many times over the last 30 years.

"We'd seen… *Les Misérables*, wasn't it?" Alistair asked, his face scrunching up with confusion.

"I thought that was London!"

"No, silly, *Cats* was in London. *Les Mis*, that was Broadway."

"Oh, was it?" Delilah said, looking at the picture closely. "Lord, your memory's better than mine! Don't know if I should be impressed or ashamed," he joked happily.

"Can we stop now?" Alistair asked, ignoring the joke. "If I'm going to die locked inside, I'd rather not do it with my life flipping page to page before my eyes."

Delilah did as he was told, folding up the book and putting it under the bed. "I just thought that you'd appreciate it," he said meekly.

"I do," Alistair said as he gripped her hands tightly. *Her*, just now; she remembered the bar, and the reunion. A lifetime ago, and yet much too short. They kept switching these days, faster than they used to. Making time. "But this isn't how I want to spend my final days on this old sod of an Earth. Why think about the past when we still have time?"

Delilah got out of bed quickly, brushing his hair behind his ears. He didn't need to, but he had to do something to deal with this feeling, this restlessness that was overwhelming him. He opened his mouth, pleading. "Stop talking like that."

Alistair sat and shook his head. "Darling, I'm old. If you catch a bug, then I'd catch a bug and that's it. It's just best that we're realistic about —"

"*No*!!" Delilah yelled, a fury in their eyes. They could barely keep themself together; their form was beginning to explode in light and colour. Their voice had split into threefold tones — their back had blossomed like a flower. "I don't… I'm not losing you, Alistair. I refuse," the Fey begged.

It took all his strength for Alistair to get up onto his feet, making his way slowly to the Fey, to his wife, his husband, his *partner*. When they'd first met, maybe he would've feared the weird, otherworldly form of his lover as they struggled to stay in one appearance for any longer than a second. His hands, wrinkled and stiff, wrapped around Delilah's as they held them tightly.

"I know you're scared. I'm scared too. But I'll be okay," he reassured her. "We had 35 years together and I would not change it for anything. Do you understand?"

Delilah breathed slowly as they tried to settle down. The substance of their body was glowing and rippling like fire — but it was cool to the touch, they knew, and so did Alistair, who did not recoil.

"I… I do," they squeaked out, leaning their body against Alistair. "I understand. I just wish…"

Alistair shushed Delilah gently, hugging them tightly.

"Don't forget me," he whispered.

"I won't. I promise."

* * *

"Excuse me!" a stranger called out from across the graveyard. "Are you well?"

The Fey turned quickly towards the stranger, an older man wearing a priest's garb. The more things changed.

"Oh, no! I wouldn't worry — I'm here to see my husband, that's all," they reassured him. The priest came over with an understanding smile.

"Of course, what else? Maybe I could help you, young… lady? Sir?"

There was a clear confusion in the old mortal's eyes, which the Fey would have laughed at, once upon a time. It was a very human concern; they knew it all too well. At least they dealt with it less and less as time went on.

"It's been a long day, Father," the Fey reassured them, "I wouldn't worry too much."

"If you insist. Do you want me to lead you?"

"No, I think I best do this by myself," the Fey said, before quickly walking into the cemetery. "Thank you, though!"

They hated being here; it stunk of death and guilt for mistakes older than them. There was a unique way of taking that guilt and dragging it out of the soul, kicking and screaming in front of a grim audience. Still, the Fey walked on, past dozens of headstones, which, to them, might as have been famed monuments — a museum to death, theirs to traverse in uneasy contemplation. They'd grown familiar with the names and directions, the number of steps it took to reach their husband.

It had been four years. Four horrible years without him.

They were just *the Fey*, now. Their human names had been buried with Alistair. There was so much that they still wanted… to say to Alistair, standing by their grave and silently mourning.

Sometimes silence spoke thousands of words; the Fey had learnt that while being here. An unspoken respect; or the sense that more needed to be said; it was hard to decipher exactly *what* words it meant. Still, the Fey had all the time in the world to figure it out. All that time and no one to spend it with.

They sat themself down on a park bench below an old tree. If they could build up the right feelings, they could go behind that tree and disappear. The right doorway and it'd be like they'd never been amongst humans. Was that what they wanted? Even they weren't sure anymore.

"Hey stranger!" called out a loud voice from behind. An intimately familiar one.

The Fey turned on their heels and saw her approaching, wrapped in an orange leather coat and looking barely a day over sixty. "Harri?"

"Who else would I be?" she sang, moving by the Fey's side and holding their hand tightly. "How's my favourite fairy? Something tells me not everything's okay," she told them as she got comfortable on the bench.

"What gave it away," the Fey asked coldly — "the fact I'm in mourning clothes, or the fact I'm in a cemetery?"

"Let's say both," Harri responded quickly, "You're not the only one here to see someone. My wife is buried here somewhere; you would've loved her."

"I did," they reminded her. "I remember the wedding. I'm shocked you settled down."

"We all change. It happens," she said with a smirk. "Like you. Changed your name a few dozen times — wasn't it Delilah when we last met?"

"Yes," they said, touched somehow that she remembered that. "Yes, it was, although…" The Fey faltered. Another decade, another reinvention to discover who they were. "I'm tired."

"Good name!" Harri joked, "I think it suits you."

Tired sighed. "You know that's not what I meant."

"But I know it still made you smirk," she said proudly.

Tired chuckled, leaning back on the bench. "I miss him," they said bluntly. "We had 35 years… And we could have had so many more. Humans die, I know that, but we could've had… We could've had so much *more* if I had just been there. If I hadn't been scared. So much has happened since. "

Harri listened silently, not wanting to interrupt her friend while they talked. She sat there silently for a while as the gears turned in Tired's head.

"You said I'd regret it," they spoke again. "I remember that. Said I'd always regret it if I never went back to him. Now I regret that I didn't do it sooner. Imagine what we could've done with another ten or twenty years together."

"I bet it would've been great, Dori," Harri said softly.

"It would've been heaven."

The pair sat in silence. Silence spoke a thousand words; Dorian had learnt that years ago. "I can't stay forever," Harri said quietly, "and I presume you can't either. Is it time to leave the human world, darling?"

"Never," Dorian insisted, "I'm not leaving Alistair. Not leaving you, not leaving the memories of this world, the ups or downs or horrible things. They made me who I am today, even if it breaks my heart." Harri smiled, kissing Dorian on the forehead.

"That doesn't surprise me," she said, smiling. "You're only human."

* * *

Dorian couldn't remember how long they'd spent sitting on the bench under the tree.

Tomorrow would be another day, Dorian thought to themself.

And they were ready to take on whatever came next.